

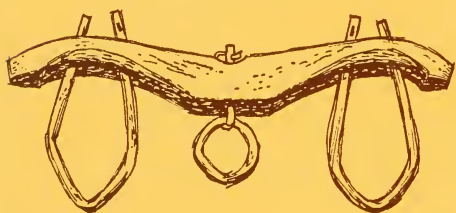
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Abraham Lincoln's legisla-
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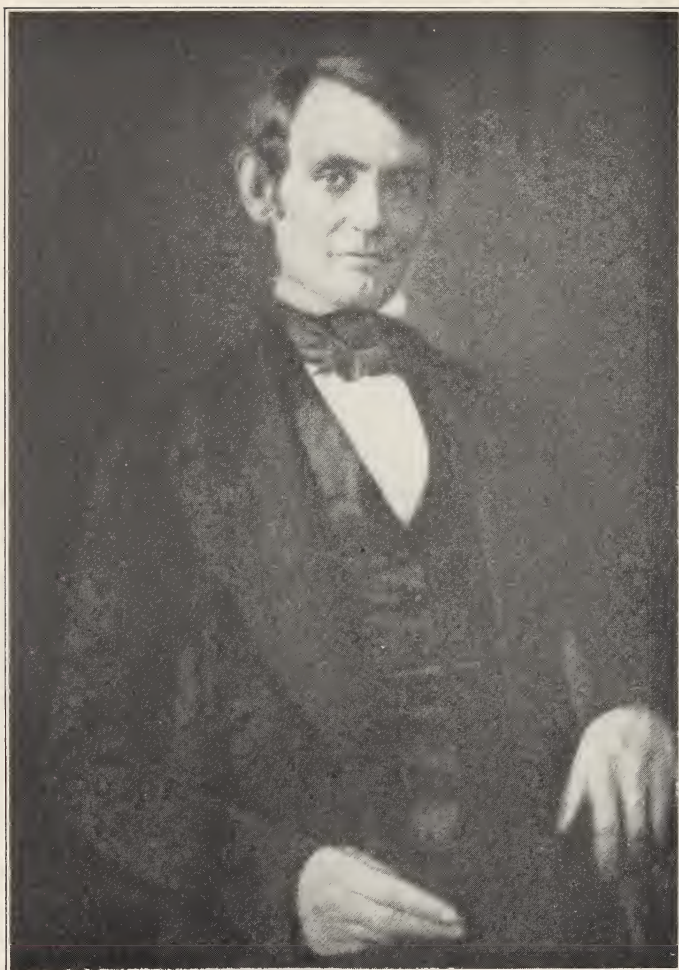
ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S
LEGISLATIVE CAREER

By
EMANUEL HERTZ

Delivered over WRNY on February 12th, 1929



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ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S LEGISLATIVE CAREER

By

EMANUEL HERTZ

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AN entire volume could easily be filled by one who would do justice to Lincoln's legislative career—in the Illinois Legislature and during his single term in Congress. This period of his life is passed over with the usual comment that he did not show much aptitude as a legislator and that his single term in Congress was barren of any results and inconspicuous from every standpoint. Some contemporary observers—Herndon among them—go even further, and declared at the time that whatever political future he had was absolutely destroyed by his unpopular attitude on the Mexican War—an expression of opinion about its unrighteousness he could have easily avoided—and by his failure as a distributor of patronage and his utter failure to reap the benefits which should have accrued to him as being the lone Whig member from Illinois—who could or should have become the dispenser of the political favors of the incoming Taylor Administration. Even the one important political plum—the position of Commissioner of the Land Office—which by all the rules of the political game belonged to Lincoln—went to Justin Butterfield of Chicago, who was far more successful in procuring political favors than was Lincoln; and besides, Daniel Webster was his spokesman in Washington.

But to come back to the legislative career of Lincoln, very little, indeed, has been done in a definite manner to properly

appraise that period of his life, and a full résumé of what he did is important and interesting in the extreme. Beginning with his first political speech, which he prepared during his first unsuccessful campaign down to the very last address during which he arraigned the Polk Administration and helped to destroy the candidacy of Cass—we find sufficient proof of the maturer Lincoln, who was then at the end of the formative period of his life. He was never, for any long period of time, inactive. He always had some problem before him, whether it was to register a protest against slavery, to remove the Capitol to Springfield, to introduce the District of Columbia resolutions, which aimed to abolish slavery in the District, or to hammer away at the “heroic” Michigander—Lincoln was primed and prepared and was ready for all comers. He certainly displayed a rare generalship in removing the seat of government from Vandalia to Springfield. Though his Party was never in the majority while he was a member of the Legislature, yet he managed so to dispose of legislation as to be able, when the time came, to swing the proposition by the vote of the needed Democratic votes. On one occasion, he had a narrow escape and succeeded in breaking a hostile quorum only, by jumping out of the window when the Democratic sergeant-at-arms had locked the door securely. He was always prepared to defeat the repeated attempts at reconsideration—and successfully steered the entire series of bills through the Legislature which accomplished the change of Capitals. We recognize the later, the maturer Lincoln who, on a crucial occasion, said: “One war at a time,” while revising Seward’s hasty message. Here he concentrated all his efforts during an entire session to this one job. He allowed nothing else to interfere with this legislation, even the signed protests against the Illinois anti-Abolitionist resolution so near to his heart had to wait. He made all manner of arrangements and agreements, but he accomplished this, to him and to Springfield, most vital work.

In the course of his career in the Legislature he became the leader of his Party and remained the most prominent Whig, and then the most prominent Republican, to the day of his elevation to the Presidency twenty years later. The Lincoln of the Sixties began to lay his foundation as the leader of his party in 1835 and kept on adding to it from day to day. The same simple honesty, the same candor, the same common sense which guided him through those turbulent years during the Civil War—helped him in the early years in the Legislature. It was then that he began to meet people from different parts of the State—his horizon became widened—and he began and continued to learn and to meet the leaders of both parties—friendly with all—and thus began the task of surrounding himself with the most prominent leaders of his day, regardless of Party.

It was quite a task to get the Congressional nomination, even when he finally did get it. Logan wanted it. Hardin was not averse to being called. Baker was ready to be drafted, Illinois was then teeming with able men—who sought elective office, the only way to fame and distinction. But finally Lincoln obtained the coveted nomination. The election followed, but not without the hardest and most intense campaign ever waged. Peter Cartwright, the fighting Methodist, a Jackson Democrat, the roving preacher—was his opponent. He covered the whole Congressional District, but Lincoln was an organizer, a keen political leader. He knew the leading men of his Congressional District as no other man knew them before or since. He had travelled backward and forward over the 8th Circuit—judges, lawyers, litigants, witnesses, innkeepers, guests, storekeepers, he met them all, he knew them all and they knew him—and he wrote a great number of letters throughout the District—what a prodigious letter writer he was we are just about beginning to realize. In spite of Cartwright's strong campaign, Lincoln won easily, and when

he won he was somewhat disappointed. Of course, his law practice suffered, as it always did when he was a candidate, and he never earned much even when occupied, by the legal business which came to his office.

For some reason, service to the state and nation took him completely away from his practice. His office was more of a haven of rest and refuge from all manner of trouble than a law office in the accepted sense. There he would eat his frugal meal when the domestic atmosphere was over-charged. There he met his political friends at important conferences. There he wrote his famous speeches and letters which made him famous. Many a man in those days and today as well, goes into politics to establish and to improve his law practice, his business, to assist him in his chosen vocation—and in case of the lawyer to attract important causes and clients—It seemed to have been the reverse with Lincoln. He practiced law, accumulated a little money from time to time, after he finally paid his debts in order to be able, when the time came, to conduct a campaign for this or the other office, for he sought nomination or appointment to office quite frequently.

It is well known that his debate with Douglas cost him practically every dollar he had, and he had a hard time to make up his expenditures and his losses, and besides the State Committee asked him for \$500 to make up its deficit. His party actually permitted him to go through the debate with Douglas and expected Lincoln to foot the bills and pay the expense. He was preparing to make an impression in Congress—for with him were the other Democratic Congressmen from Illinois—six in number—Richardson and Orlando Ficklin among them—all men with a future,—and he the lone Whig.

He knew the personnel of the new Congress and required all the time that elapsed before he took his seat to become

acquainted with the routine and the main actors in that body. He knew that he could not succeed himself. It was practically agreed that he should not be a candidate to succeed himself. Logan was tentatively agreed upon, so that whatever he was to do or to achieve had to be done during those fateful two years. Constituents were as impatient then as they are now. The new men are expected to do things, to sponsor new legislation, procure appropriations for local improvements, reward the leaders who assisted in their campaigns with appointive office, or rather as he often termed it provide them with political appointments—"for a way to live without work"—all of which was out of the question for this first term Congressman.

But aside from his lack of success along these lines, we must admit, if we compare his performances, his grasp and his courage and his honesty—that very few first term members of the House of Representatives have done more, considering all the circumstances. Of course, it is true that Henry Clay was chosen Speaker on his first entry into the House. But Henry Clay was probably the most gifted and brilliant man who ever entered Congress. John Quincy Adams had been President and, of course, exerted influence and commanded respect when he began the great career in the House. Douglas, too, made a great record but he belonged to the great Democratic Party—the champion of the great Jackson, and a remarkable and gifted man, second only to Henry Clay—who up to that time knew no defeat and was at the pinnacle of one of the most successful political careers in the history of American politics.

From the utterances of his associates, from the consideration given to him by the Speaker, Robert C. Winthrop—the Brahmin from Boston—and judging from the speeches he made—we may fairly infer that had Lincoln returned for a second term he would have been a great power in the House—second

to no other member. But his faithful friend and partner, Herndon, kept on bombarding him with gloomy letters about the ground he was losing, about his unpopularity, by reason of his attitude on the Mexican War, and by his introduction of the so-called Spot Resolutions, catechising the President and his whole military party who had just been crowned with unparalleled success and glory in the Mexican War—and incidentally added an empire to the United States.

Lincoln, of course, voted for all measures to supply and munition the army and to sustain the conduct of the war to the end, once war had been declared. But he could not be induced or prevailed upon by mere considerations of Party policy or his own future, to vote approval of what he considered dishonorable, unfair and unjust, and he thus considered our attitude before and during the Mexican War, and demonstrated it by remorseless logic and proof. And he made his position so clear that all could understand, political friend and foe alike. For Lincoln was never misunderstood. His words were clear, simple and lucid. He was not as violent as Tom Corwin—but his attack was more effective because he was calm and consistent, and he demonstrated his position and his ideas as clearly as Euclid demonstrated a simple geometrical theorem. And he so explained his attitude to Herndon, and said: “You would have acted as I did, for I know that you are an honest man.” And when his partner persisted, he simply asked him to re-read his speeches and his letters of explanation.

He was careful to revise the speeches he delivered in Congress before release, and which were then printed in pamphlet form for home distribution. He had no fear of ultimate vindication and of the triumph of right, hence he urged the distribution of his speeches, though assured by Herndon and others that he was losing friends and was destroying his political future. It was while in Congress that he had time to study

and survey the processes of government. It was during that period that he began to know the men who were to become the great figures of the Civil War on both sides. It was during his one Congressional term that he began to study the tactics and utterances of Douglas, and to estimate the hold he had upon his party, and how to dislodge him when the hour struck. It was then that he met and came to know Stephens (the Vice President of the Confederacy ten years later) and unconsciously, perhaps, began a mental joint debate with the leaders of the slave party.

From Congress he slid into the Taylor Presidential campaign, and made a great number of addresses, attempting the impossible task of keeping the, even then, disintegrating Whig Party alive. They began to call for him in other states. He was able to see that the day of Henry Clay had passed—that Webster and Calhoun and Benton had seen their day—were visibly aging—were about ready to retire—that new men, younger men, were needed to carry on the fight if slavery was to be ultimately extinguished and the Union kept together.

He had met Seward and Chase and Giddings, he read the utterances of all the leaders of the Abolitionist Party, as well as those of the leaders of the South, and with this ever-increasing fund of knowledge, this new information these experiences thus gained, he returned to Springfield seemingly at the end of his political career—but really only to think and study and prepare and arrange all his mental faculties and accumulated knowledge and information for the great event, for the glorious adventure which he felt was coming, was in store for him, in the indistinct future.

He knew and had an abiding faith that the political position of the South, as represented by the statesmen and spokesmen of that era, was wrong, and that it could not prevail. The

experience of mankind was against the cause. And then he looked for leadership among all the men he met and heard and read about, and he became gloomier than ever; he saw the deficiencies, the idiosyncrasies, the vanities, the weaknesses, the drawbacks of each; but he held his counsel and prepared for the time to come. He again returned to his spasmodic periods of the practice of the law. For when he had nothing of real importance to do he practiced law. And the amazing thing about it all was the undisputed fact that he was a great lawyer, the leader of the bar in Illinois—but he did not know it, or did not believe it. He certainly did not profit by it. He barely made a living—and was frequently subjected to mock trials by his associates for charging scandalously small fees for invaluable services he had rendered, returning fees to clients who voluntarily assessed the value of his services—because he thought they were excessive. Others became rich by reason of their practice and by land speculation. Lincoln was not interested in either method and remained a poor man.

But he continued his contacts with the people, in the courts, in the country hotels, in the stores, on the streets, in the newspapers and by mail, for no man wrote quite as many letters as did Lincoln, and excellent and remarkable letters they are, never fearing to tell the truth. Witness this one to a clergyman who criticized his attitude on the Mexican War—and it became quite fashionable to refer to his Mexican War record—as well as to the speeches he made. Douglas repeatedly referred to his Spot Resolutions and undertook to fasten the charge of disloyalty upon Lincoln by reason of his attitude towards those who brought about the Mexican War. To Rev. J. M. Peck, Lincoln wrote a letter, because the minister had spoken at a Belleville celebration of the battle of Buena Vista, saying, “In view of all the facts, the conviction to my mind is irresistible that the Government of the United

States committed no aggression on Mexico." To him Lincoln wrote: "Not in view of all the facts. There are facts which you have kept out of view." And he went on:

"It is a fact that the United States army in marching to the Rio Grande marched into a peaceful Mexican settlement, and frightened the inhabitants away from their homes and their growing crops. It is a fact that Fort Brown, opposite Matamoras, was built by that army within a Mexican cotton-field, on which at the time the army reached it a young cotton crop was growing, and which crop was wholly destroyed and the field itself greatly and permanently injured by ditches, embankments, and the like. It is a fact that when the Mexicans captured Captain Thornton and his command, they found and captured them within another Mexican field.

"Now I wish to bring these facts to your notice, and to ascertain what is the result of your reflections on them. If you deny that they are facts, I think I can furnish proof which shall convince you that you are mistaken. If you admit that they are facts, then I shall be obliged for a reference to any law of language, law of States, law of nations, law of morals, law of religions, any law, human or divine, in which an authority can be found for saying those facts constitute 'no aggression.' Possibly you consider those acts too small for notice. Would you venture to so consider them had they been committed by any nation on earth against the humblest of our people? I know you would not. Then I ask, is the precept, 'Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them' obsolete? Of no force? Of no application? I shall be pleased if you can find leisure to write me."

This certainly does not sound as though Lincoln had any regrets as to his course in Congress—nor does it disclose that

he was in fear of political consequences to his future, such as he was figuring out would be his. He was prepared to debate the justice of his votes, of his speeches, with anyone—at any time—and what is more—he was confident of his being in the right. How fine a characteristic in his make-up this was may be seen when he was precisely in the same position in Washington during his Presidency. It was his life work to convert the hostile majority to his way of thinking.

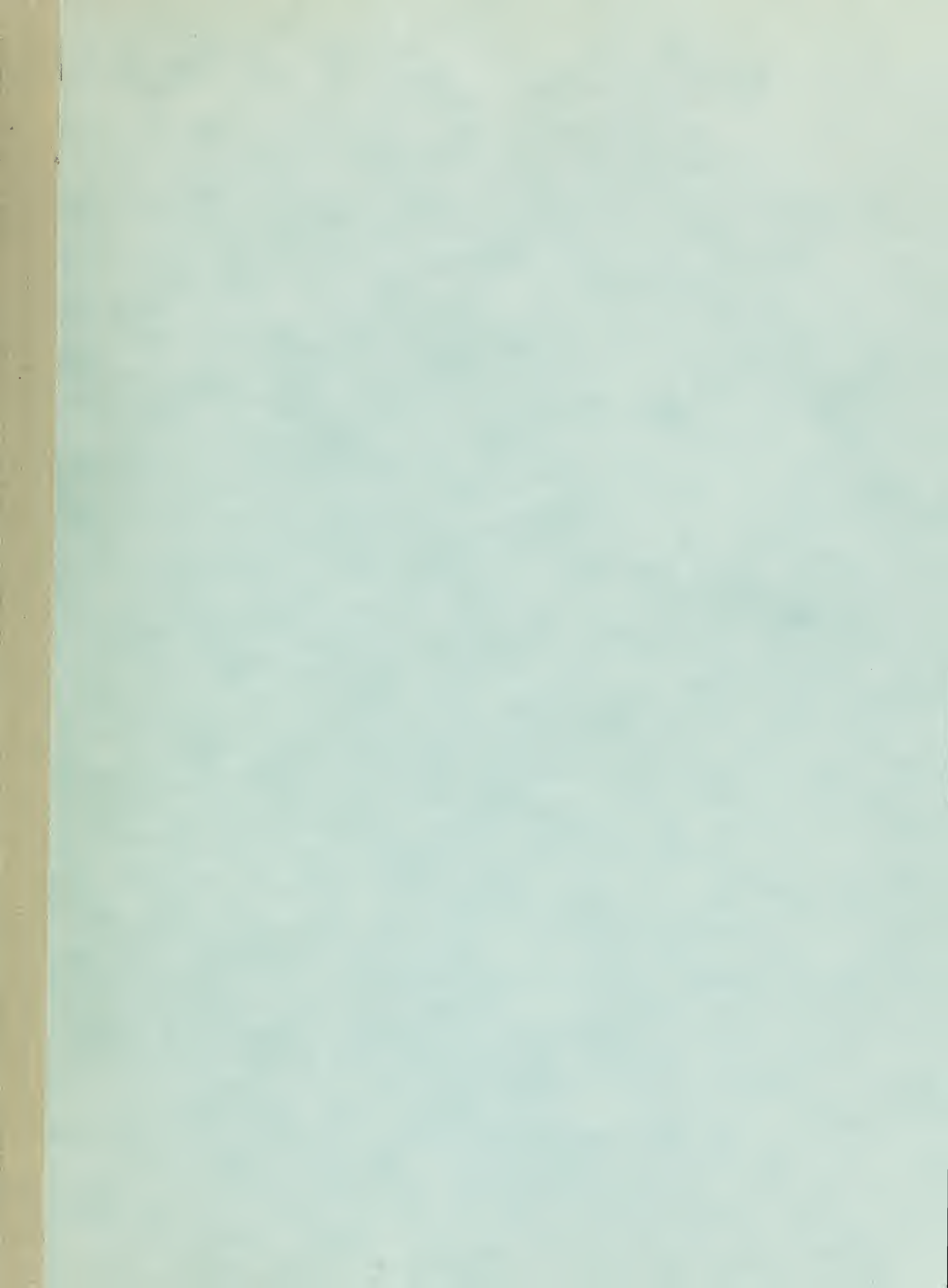
Do you not see and recognize the Lincoln who could castigate a Carl Schurz, who could disarm Horace Greeley, and who could counter and hold at arms' length the entire host of hostile critics? All these attributes became sharpened and strengthened by his legislative career—which has hitherto either been overlooked or underestimated by his biographers.

But far more important than his actual performances or his utterances during his legislative years—was the fact that just as he became known to all the political leaders and factors and groups in Illinois—during the five years he spent in the Legislature—and was able in years to come to benefit by the experiences in the political contests in Illinois, so did his Congressional experience widen his horizons, until he was as much at home on the national political chessboard, as he was in his own district. No man has ever been plucked from obscurity without any experience, without any knowledge, without any executive ability, to cope with problems such as those Lincoln was called upon to solve—and he was no exception—excepting only that his political training, like his early education, was amazingly brief, and yielded wonderful results; and the needed preparation and experience so rich and plentiful, that when the day of trial came he was able to answer: "Here I am, ready," and proceed to cope with tasks such as were assigned by fate to none of his predecessors and to none of his successors in office—and from the performance of which he emerged the greatest figure of his day and gen-

eration—and left a heritage of inspiration to his countrymen for all time to come—as long as we remain under the aegis of the Constitution and the immortal Declaration which he strove and succeeded to maintain—and bequeath to his successors in the office which he ennobled—a legacy of Presidential conduct and mode of life which all might well copy and emulate if democracy and republican institution are to exist, and a representative form of government, for which our fathers fought and bled and died, is to endure.







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